

November 27, 2006      Once again the possibility of reinstating a military draft is being discussed in Washington, and while the idea seems remote it is not unthinkable. Democratic Congressman Charles Rangel of New York, soon to be a powerful committee chair, has openly called for reinstating the Selective Service System. Retired Army General Barry McCaffrey claims that our ground forces in both Afghanistan and Iraq are stretched far too thin, and desperately need reinforcements. Meanwhile, other political and military leaders suggest that several hundred thousand additional troops might be needed simply to restore some semblance of order in Iraq. We are nearing the point where a choice will have to be made: either decrease our troop commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan significantly, or produce thousands of new military recruits quickly. So a discussion of military conscription is not purely academic. Yet the Department of Defense remains steadfastly opposed to a draft. A Pentagon report stated that draft registration could be eliminated "with no effect on military mobilization and no measurable effect on military recruitment." Most military experts believe a draft would actually impair military readiness, despite the increase in raw manpower, because of training and morale problems. So why is the idea of a draft even considered? One answer is that our military forces are spread far too thin, engaged in conflicts around the globe that are none of our business. With hundreds of thousands of troops stationed in literally hundreds of foreign nations, we simply don't have enough soldiers to invade and occupy every country labeled a threat or deemed ripe for regime change. Given the choice, many in Congress would rather draft more young bodies than rethink our role as world policeman and bring some of our troops home. Military needs aside, some politicians simply love the thought of mandatory service to the federal government. The political right favors sending young people to fight in aggressive wars like Iraq. The political left longs to send young people into harm's way to save the world in places like Darfur. But both sides share the same belief that citizens should serve the needs of the state-- a belief our founders clearly rejected in the Declaration of Independence. To many politicians, the American government is America. This is why, on a crude level, the draft appeals to patriotic fervor. Compulsory national service, whether in the form of military conscription or make-work programs like AmeriCorps, still sells on Capitol Hill. Conscription is wrongly associated with patriotism, when really it represents collectivism and involuntary servitude. I believe wholeheartedly that an all-volunteer military is not only sufficient for national defense, but also preferable. It is time to abolish the Selective Service System and resign military conscription to the dustbin of American history. Five hundred million dollars have been wasted on Selective Service since 1979, money that could have been returned to taxpayers or spent to improve the lives of our nation's veterans. Ronald Reagan said it best: "The most fundamental objection to draft registration is moral." The notion of involuntary servitude, in whatever form, is simply incompatible with a free society.